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ROGER DEAN
CREATIVE IMPROVISATION

Contemporary Music And Beyond

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Creative Improvisation: Jazz, Contemporary Music and Beyond

*How to develop techniques of improvisation
for any musical context*

ROGER T. DEAN
with assistance from Ashley C. Brown

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Preface

Objectives of the book

Improvisation in music is the simultaneous conception and production of sound in performance. It now has wide application within the work of classically trained instrumentalists, of those in popular and commercial (for instance incidental) music, and of jazz musicians. If you are a classical player, improvisation may be a feared void: in order to avoid improvisation, some classical musicians develop an attitude of disregard or condescension towards it. If you are becoming a commercial musician, improvisation is a limited technical challenge which has to be met. If you are a jazz musician or 'free' improviser, it is of course the subject of central concern.

As a classical musician you are rarely presented with opportunities to learn to improvise. For instance educational institutions are sometimes unsympathetic towards improvisation. Additionally your experience of composed music may give you an awareness of the difficulty of attaining genuine compositional or improvisational creativity. Nevertheless, the structural procedures of the composer (whether tonality or serialism) are in themselves very simple, in rather the same way that many jazz themes are. Conversely the structures embodied in Cage's chance compositions, and those in the freest improvisation, may well be the most complex which can arise in music. This book aims to help you to develop a broad awareness of the possibilities of improvisation, which co-exist with those of composition. It is now increasingly necessary for you to have some ability in improvisation.

The only musicians whose needs in developing improvisation are well met by the available literature are the commercial musicians. For you the challenge is to provide 'fills' for quite simple sequences of harmonies occupying a relatively short space of time on a recording. You can learn how to do this by means of a myriad of books (see selection listed in Chapter 11)

which emphasise gaining fluency in playing the scales and arpeggios closely associated with the harmonies in question. There is usually little need for genuine improvisation. But the musicians who succeed in the commercial market are those with abilities beyond the minimum. This book may encourage in you wider, and perhaps more rewarding, improvising abilities.

Jazz is a unique music, often with unusually strong emphasis on pulse, and on rhythmic variety. We find it of limitless potential. If you are a jazz musician, you may have used these same scale/chord books as primary material. Unfortunately the books hardly begin to represent the possibilities of jazz and they evince such a limited approach to improvisation that they became stifling if used more than briefly. Sudnow (Ref. 1 [R1]: see p. xiii) has described his own interesting experiences in developing abilities in conventional jazz piano playing, but he too illustrates how to use and avoid these conventions only in relation to his particular instrument, rather than how to approach improvising in a fundamental way, and regardless of instrument. The tutors listed in Chapter 11 and their cohorts mostly lack consideration of melodic improvisation, and especially lack discussion of melodic improvisation pursued outside a simple harmonic framework. They do not discuss the use of rhythmic devices as the ground for improvisation, and so on. If you are a musician whose prime interest is the most unrestricted improvisation possible, these books are almost useless. Again, we aim in this book to expand the technical armoury you can bring to bear in improvising, and to encourage you to develop your own personal approaches.

So we attempt in the book to fill the major gaps left by present practical books on improvisation. Rather than adopting an approach based solely on the conventions (instead of the limitless extensions) of the jazz tradition, and based on simple harmonies, we treat the fundamental musical elements (such as pitch, rhythm, melody, timbre, etc.) in turn as elements which can form the basis of improvisation within any tradition (or moving outside them). We then discuss the integration of these approaches, so that the concerns of the classical musician, of the jazz musician, and of those who wish to move freely beyond these categories, are equally considered. We have purposely not separated these different approaches in most of the text, until Chapters 10 and 11. For us, these different concerns are not in any way opposed: they should be freely combined, with happy results. Similarly the application of the procedures in and experiences of the book may be appropriate in almost any musical context. For example the commercial musician will be able to use them to add the spice in the curry, the sugar to the yoghurt, or the rough edge to the smooth!

The book is intended as a practical guide, and is extensively illustrated with exercises. Notated exercises are provided in the book, but besides understanding and fulfilling these exercises, it is even more crucial to develop aural abilities. Many authors have emphasised how distracting, even power-wielding, the written score can be (e.g. R2, which gives a very forceful analysis of the negative impact of notation). Aural abilities are

needed in identifying features of the improvisation of the musicians with whom you are performing, so that you in turn can use, or relate to, these features. Some methods for developing these aural abilities are indicated in the book, but in addition, there is available, direct from the publishers an accompanying tape which has a large number of exercises which you can use without the intermediacy of musical notation, just as you will when improvising with others. This tape has been prepared by us in collaboration with other members of our new music group, Lysis, all of whom are involved in improvisation; we think the tape will be at least as important as the book in helping you develop your improvisation.

Some of the ideas in the book are rarely to be found as yet in improvisatory practice, while many can be observed at work in the western, Asian and Pacific traditions. Most spring in part from our own, fairly wide, improvising experience. We emphasise throughout that you should develop personal selectivity and ultimately creativity, and not simply fulfil pre-arranged conventional criteria. Nevertheless, the fundamental approaches we present could equally be used for the latter purpose, which is not necessarily antithetic.

Knowledge assumed in the reader

We have designed the examples so that they will be readily understood by those familiar with western music. We assume some knowledge of notation, key signatures and intervals, metre and time signatures. We also assume that you have a basic (not necessarily advanced) facility with playing some pitched instrument. We consider motivic and harmonic matters with regard to equal tempered instruments (such as the piano), but we believe that our approaches can readily be generalised to cover other tuning systems and instruments. Our approach is equally relevant to 'unpitched' sounds (e.g. percussion), and these are considered specifically in the discussions of timbre and textures in the book.

How to use this book

In the brief discussion of the bases for creative improvisation in the Introduction, we have discussed further both the attraction and the possible distraction in identifying musical elements through notation rather than through perception of sounds. As an improviser you will eventually mainly deal in the latter form of identification, if in any. Nevertheless, notated examples are essential for us to explain simple musical procedures clearly. We point out frequently in what follows the possibility of abstracting a very limited amount of musical information which is characteristic of an event, rather than of extracting the maximum information. Rapidity of response often requires the simplifying procedure.

So in the book we provide exercises in conventional notation, and others

with graphical notation (the exercises are indicated by the chapter number followed by the exercise number, so that cross-reference can be made). Most examples are notated both in treble and bass clefs, in case you find one easier to read than the other. If you find that any of the exercises tax your ability to play your instrument too much for comfort, change the octave at which you play it; if necessary modify the exercise to eliminate the particular technical difficulty you find. However, make sure that doing this does not remove the feature of the exercise which is the reason for its existence.

In addition to the notated examples, we provide in the accompanying cassette both examples to be heard and analysed or appreciated, and exercises to be used as the basis for controlled responses of the kind we discuss in the text, without the intermediacy of notation. It is extremely desirable that you use both notated examples in the book, and the aural examples on the cassette. However, if for any reason you lack the cassette, certain aural exercises can be constructed from those we notate. The simplest way of doing this is to get a friend to play some of the examples we have notated, and to make a tape of this which you can then use later without reference to the notation. In the later parts of the book this method of substituting for the tape will be far from ideal, and you may find it quite awkward: we cannot overstress the desirability of having access to the tape.

It is important if at all possible to give equal emphasis at first to both kinds of exercises, notated and recorded. Use the notated examples first, and proceed through a section of a chapter. Then go back and use the taped examples. Later, you may wish to progress a second time through the book, or through a chapter, with your own needs dictating the degree of attention you give to the two different kinds of exercises. Thus for classical musicians the step of departing from the notation may be the most difficult and the most instructive; yet you may also wish to emphasise the notated exercises if preparing for improvisation in the composed context (see Section 4). For the committed improviser, the aural examples may be far more important on this second reading and response to the book's materials. Chapters may be supplemented with references and notes (indicated as 'R1', 'R2', and so on in parentheses), and with musical sources (records or scores) which are indicated as 'M1', etc. in parentheses.

It is important to be aware that the exercises in this book require a lot of effort before they can be fully achieved. You may find that you can progress (at least in a basic way) through the first four chapters at the rate of perhaps two weeks per chapter. These chapters concern single musical processes. But as you get further in the book the complexity of the ideas, and thus the difficulty of putting them into full effect, increases dramatically. These later chapters combine many musical processes. Yet it is not comparably more difficult to describe them, and so the amount of time you will need to spend per page of text, and per text example, increases tremendously. At the same time we try to encourage more independent thought and improvisation from you, so the amount of description we need to give for what may be perhaps

ten exercises or more may eventually be only a sentence. So you must expect to move very slowly through the latter parts of the book. Note that we often ask questions of you, and working out responses may be a long procedure. Sometimes you will find that we give a sample response: such responses are always just examples of the kinds of responses you might usefully make. Quite often we leave you to work out your own responses without giving our own: we hope to elicit your ideas and not simply to propagandise for ours.

The final five chapters concern techniques and abilities which everyone continues to develop (or should) throughout their improvising experience: so you must take these *extremely* slowly. Above all, choose your own speed and do not hesitate to go back to early sections whenever you find difficulty in applying one technique in conjunction with another: everyone does.

The appendices are intended to give useful specific information in relation to particular musical instruments; to provide leads to source recordings and articles which you may find interesting; and to describe the contents of the tape. All sources used are acknowledged as they occur. We particularly thank Jackson MacLow, Tom Phillips and Soma Recording and Publishing (in the case of Roger Dean) for permission to reproduce complete works. Most materials in the examples are original.

We have developed this book from our own continuing improvising, and from workshops and lectures we have given in many parts of the world. We have gained a lot from these interactions. In particular we would like to thank Hazel Smith, Torbjorn Hultmark, and the other members of Lysis, for their contributions at every level. Valuable comments and suggestions were also obtained from Shankar Ghosh, Martyn Harry, Richard Middleton, Jeff Pressing and our editor, Peter Wright. The responsibility for what is presented here remains entirely our own, of course.

The ideas we discuss here are sufficiently fundamental to have relevance to the practice of improvisation within western and other musical traditions. If the book stimulates a broadening of your approach, it will have fulfilled our aims.

Roger Dean
Ashley Brown

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Introduction

Concepts of improvisation

'Improvisation' has been defined as 'the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously' (R1). A more recent definition is 'a performance according to the inventive whim of the moment' (R2); but a regrettably pejorative overtone is inherent in the use of the word 'whim'. In a recent forum on improvisation, Solomon (R3) describes the fundamental ideal of improvisation as 'the discovery and invention of original music spontaneously, while performing it, without preconceived formulation, scoring or context'. He then admits that this description is of an extreme condition which cannot be realised entirely. There are confusions and unnecessary assumptions in many of the published definitions. For instance, that any music could be 'spontaneous' and without 'preconceived formulation' is debatable; that it could be without 'preconceived context' is ultimately impossible; and that it should avoid use of scoring is unnecessary, since scoring does not prohibit improvisation in the wide sense of the first definition. Solomon (R3) even goes so far as to use the word composition within one description of improvisation: a distracting and confusing usage.

A more open attitude towards music in general and improvisation in particular is developing however. Several streams of thought have influenced this: for instance, recently increased awareness of the danger of making any simple equation between artistic output and personal expression. This results in part from semiotics (e.g. R4), which would deny the existence of personal expression. An amusing example of the limits to the relation between artistic output and its impact is the experimental study of Konecni (R5). This shows that, however positive, the attitudes of listeners towards particular pieces of music (including famous classical compositions such as Beethoven, pop music, jazz improvisation by Keith Jarrett, etc.) bore little relation to the stated intentions of their creators. This discourse on

the nature and effects of artistic products has undermined prejudices which hold that improvisation, being immediate, must be simplistic (while composition, being premeditated, may be profound). The possible complexity and power of improvisation is indicated by the fact that the Indian improviser undergoes a training much more extensive than that of the western interpretative performer; and by the central use of improvisation within America's most substantial musical contribution, jazz (see R6 for a sympathetic introduction to jazz).

In his fascinating book on improvisation (R7), Derek Bailey (the pioneering guitar improviser) offers both a balanced introduction to the significance of improvisation in Indian and western music, and also some more *stimulating* definitions than those above. For instance, from the poet Peter Riley: 'The exploration of occasion'. And from another poet, Stéphane Mallarmé: 'A poem freed from the apparatus of the scribe'. The psychological importance and value of improvisation to the musicians involved, and potentially to the audience, is indicated in the following statements also quoted by Bailey: Leo Smith (improvising trumpeter): improvisation is 'the ability to instantaneously organise sound, silence and rhythm with the whole of his or her creative intelligence'; Tony Oxley (improvising percussionist): 'I have no reservations about the value of improvisation. To me it has been the single most liberating factor of my life; socially, politically, and musically'. And to quote Bailey himself: improvisation 'has no need of argument and justification. It exists because it meets the creative appetite . . . and because it involves [the musician] completely, as nothing else can, in the act of music-making'. An interesting analysis of the sociological and political overtones of this involvement in free improvisation in the last twenty years is within R8.

Our purpose in this book is to give you practical guidance in exploiting the musical elements of improvisation. First, in the remainder of this Introduction we will give a very brief synopsis of the occurrence of improvisation in past music. We can then outline the assumptions which tend to remain at the root of present improvisation, and which therefore are important for your efforts in improvising.

Some uses of improvisation in music of the past

In western music some improvisation was present in much vocal and instrumental music, between about 1100 and 1900. At first it usually consisted of decoration of vocal lines, whose accompaniment was not changed in response; decoration of lines in instrumental performance; and the keyboard player's amplification of the harmonies of 'figured basses'. The first two examples are a kind of melodic extension; the latter example, of figured bass realisations, is a similar harmonic (rather than melodic) extension. The improvisation was usually very limited, although particularly in the early part of this period there were some extended improvised forms. In

the sixteenth and seventeenth century the improvisation of 'divisions' over repeated ground basses and harmonic sequences was very important; it is quite similar in concept to the performance of conventional jazz using simple chord sequences. Later, mainly in the eighteenth century, movements of suites might merely offer harmonic structures from which the player (usually at a keyboard) would develop a whole performance. Here melodic improvisation on pre-arranged harmonies was required: a situation akin to that of early jazz, around 1900.

A hybrid kind of improvisation was permissible in the concerto cadenza of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this a solo performer, who was often required to play rather virtuosic music in the composed part of the concerto, was allowed 'free' rein for unaccompanied invention. So he had the opportunity of both harmonic and melodic improvisation. From most accounts, the response was often to display technical virtuosity even more fully, with partly preconceived material; though some players may have responded to the real musical challenge. Many of the well-known composers of these centuries (e.g. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven) were also renowned for 'spontaneous' keyboard performances. Documentary evidence suggests that, however brilliant, these performances were mainly contained within the style employed in the compositions of the musician in question.

Improvisation with melodic and harmonic freedom was also pursued on the organ, as it still is. J. S. Bach and other German and French composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were active in this area. In the nineteenth century composers such as Bruckner and Widor were also effective in this pastime. And in the twentieth century the tradition has continued particularly in France. Dupré wrote a treatise on improvisation (R9: 1925), and one of his pupils, the composer Messiaen, was active in improvisation in his own church of La Trinité even in the 1970s. Messiaen was somewhat unusual amongst organ improvisers, in that it is reported that his improvisations were quite distinct from his compositions, even from his organ compositions. So Messiaen may have been to some degree exploiting improvisation for ends only obtainable through it. On the other hand, as revealed in discussions in Bailey's book (R7), many organists, though trained in improvisation, sadly pursue it only as a limited, largely functional activity, and one which they imagine to be inferior to composition.

In western composition since around 1950, improvised elements have been used increasingly. This probably resulted from the increased awareness on the part of composers of the substantial musical achievements in jazz and free improvisation, and of the technical innovations in instrumental performance largely affected by the same fields. This will be discussed in more detail later in the book, but a preliminary point may be made here. There is often confusion in discussion of such music between improvisation and indeterminacy (or aleatoric); both terms are often used to describe music which contains improvised elements. This is an unfortunate usage, and more properly 'aleatory' should be confined to those situations where

'musical elements are well defined, but used in chance combinations' (R10). The word 'aleatory' indeed derives from the Latin for 'dice'. 'Indeterminacy' is so general a term that it is rarely very useful in relation to music.

Improvisation in western music has changed considerably in the course of time. In contrast, it is arguable that improvisation in non-western traditions, such as that of India, and for that matter with flamenco (from Spain), has been relatively unchanging. This may be related to the clear-cut social functions which these musics, particularly in India and Indonesia, fulfil (e.g. R11). In the rendering of a particular Indian raga, the performers have a preconception of a state they wish to conjure by rigorous disciplines, for instance in the handling of rhythmic cycles (or *talas*), and in the sequence in which the defined pitches of the raga are used during the improvisation. Nevertheless, in the performance of any raga virtually no element is precisely defined in advance: the degree of improvisation varies substantially within different parts of the performance, but is always present. Indian ideas and instruments have been applied to both popular music, and to jazz and freer improvisation. Some interesting recordings reflecting this are listed in the 'Musical materials' list for this chapter. However, as pointed out by Pressing (R12), there are anyway underlying structural similarities in the organisation of pitches and rhythms in these oriental musics which seem to be shared with western composed music and jazz.

While there are many other improvising traditions outside the west (e.g. Iran, Islamic Africa, Japan) these too have tended to be relatively unchanging idioms. And many other Asiatic and Oceanic musics may have derived from improvisation but are now more performed from memory and taught by rote (e.g. Balinese and Javanese music). For instance Hood (R11: 1975) describes simply 'filling in' the 'gending' or fixed melodies of Java, which melodies themselves are complex and subtle compositions. This relative lack of change with time and use of simple 'filling in' is shared with Flamenco, a guitar-based music of Spain, whose modifications are largely restricted to the addition of peripheral rhythmic instruments, especially in commercial versions.

It is a common feature of the application of improvisation to commercial music, whether in the west or the east, that the improvisation is of a regimented kind, whose range is hardly any wider than the simple harmonic and melodic basis of the composed parts of the music. It could be argued that the performer of commercial music has no need of improvising skills beyond the most rudimentary. However, certain conventions of accentuation, timing, phrasing, harmonic usage, and so on, are needed which may well be most effectively learnt within a systematic study of the improvising techniques in which they originated, rather than in cold isolation. Similarly the flexibility of musical response needed in high-calibre commercial musicians may be most effectively gleaned by studying the intense responsiveness needed in some forms of improvisation; these forms of response are amongst the features of improvisation which make it unique.

The central improvising tradition in western music is jazz (R5), which originated in the USA. This initially and for some time had functional social roles (like the oriental musics mentioned above), but has increasingly diversified and become more complex. Jazz has broadened rhythmic usage throughout music, and produced many musicians whose techniques have influenced all subsequent performers of their instrument. Most of the preconceptions of jazz (such as repeating twelve or thirty-two bar sequences, fixed pulses, and simple harmonic bases of a chordal or scalar kind, etc.) have gradually been eroded, though they now co-exist with their successors. Eventually around 1960 a category of improvisation which avowedly removed itself from the jazz tradition became important, particularly in Europe (e.g. music discussed in R6). The interactions of this tradition with European composition were and are extensive, and subsequently there has been a reverse diffusion of the musical procedures in this work back to the USA. There (and in Europe) jazz has also been maintained, though often in a somewhat constricted manner.

Some basic assumptions in creative improvisation

The philosophy, psychology and psycho-acoustics relevant to music and its perception and appreciation are incompletely understood (see for example R4 and R5). Thus for the practitioner of improvisation or composition, many sets of assumptions are perfectly viable, and no less substantiated than each other. Let's consider briefly the extreme positions possible, and also some of the features of improvisation which might make it a vehicle for significantly different musical output from composition.

A fundamental issue is the degree of control which the producer of music wishes to exercise. An almost infinite range of control is possible. As illustrated by the brief synopsis in the previous section, composers in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries often left a degree of freedom to the performer: that is the composer did not utilise maximum control. Later, particularly in this century, the opposite trend (towards maximum control by the composer) has been very obvious, but it has also been accompanied by a complementary movement in composition tending to emphasise either aleatory or improvisation (R10).

As an improviser you have a similar choice. You may wish to exercise systematic control over your performance, for instance by using defined musical elements in codifiable ways. If you are a jazz musician who uses chord sequences and fixed pulses then you fall into this category, whether or not you're aware of it. You may also wish to have control over the improvised environment in which you play. So you might introduce composed sounds or musical elements which are shared by all musicians, or used selectively by some, or use defined procedures on musical material which is in no way pre-arranged.

In complete opposition to these stances, you could choose to minimise

both your self-control, and your control over the musical environment in which you improvise. You may wish to view the musical environment as solely produced by fellow musicians, or to view it in a much wider sense, closer to that which John Cage might envisage (see R10, 13–14). Such a wider view might affirm that all elements of the sonic environment can be taken as musical, and may have an impact on the perception and effectiveness of the music.

These various positions have clear implications at each of the simpler musical levels, such as those of melody, rhythm, etc. Many of these will be discussed in much more detail throughout the text. The point we want to establish here is that they may all be useful in creating music, and they are not necessarily mutually incompatible. Indeed in the work of improvisers, but rarely in that of composers, their compatibility is regularly exploited.

The aesthetics of music and the issue of what relationships there are between perception of musical sound and any further effects on the brain (such as 'emotional responses') are beyond our scope here, and are unresolved matters (e.g. R4, R5). The fundamental assumption behind the remainder of this book, is that contrast (that is juxtaposition of distinct musical characteristics) is the major feature which must dictate any such further effects. This view can be derived from the simpler assumption that an isolated sound has no necessary correlate in the brain (immature or mature) beyond that involved in the perception of the sound. In contrast, even an isolated word has some implications for the educated brain beyond the purely acoustic ones. Because words are used to signify objects, ideas, and so on, these signifieds are brought to mind fairly reliably once the word has been heard and identified. We do not know of any such reliable correlates of isolated sounds in music. Music is a succession of sounds however, and a succession of sounds may have 'iconic' functions (in which some similarity between the sounds and whatever they might signify exists) or arbitrary ones (in which no necessary relationship exists, but signification might still occur). See R4 and R5 for discussion of these issues, and R15 for an interesting discussion of these two categories of signification within Javanese music (Becker), and within rhythm more generally (Clarke).

Once we accept that contrast is an important musical factor, then one aspect of improvisational competence must be the capacity to generate (and if necessary control) musical contrast. So, much of this book is concerned with techniques which can achieve such control. This emphasis does not deny the improviser's option of expunging these contrasts to whatever degree he or she wishes and is capable. Such an exclusion of course requires familiarity with (and possibly expertise in) what contrasts can be generated.

In concluding this section we may briefly summarise features of improvisation which distinguish it from composition, since these may permit improvised music to achieve some ends not accessible to composition. Thus the element of occasion in improvisation, mentioned already, could be one such feature. Similarly, while we cannot logically assume that a premedi-

tated piece will be less or more significant than an improvised one, the element of premeditation may permit composition to have some unique features. The direct relationship between performers and their instruments when improvising may also have effect: the analytical step of reading music is removed. Instead, improvisers have the option of (but not commitment to) analysing the sounds of their musical environment, and perhaps responding to it: something that by definition is excluded from a composition, which does not first exist in the environment in which it is first heard. These 'process' aspects of music and improvisation in particular are discussed in R16, which frankly admits what an elementary stage of understanding we have reached so far.

The possibility of direct interaction between musicians is perhaps the most appealing aspect of improvisation, and one which is virtually excluded from composition. Certainly it is an aspect which nearly all improvisers appreciate (see R6, R7 for example). Some unique features may well result from it.

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Available musical materials

Some records revealing influences of Indian music in western improvisation:
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John Coltrane (1965) *Om*, Impulse AS-9140
Joe Harriott and John Mayer (1966–7) *Indo Jazz Fusions*, Duo 123 (double)
Miles Davis (1974) *Get Up With It*, CBS 88092 (double)

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